

Practice Evaluation Project: Independent Living Program

Sherry Roberts

Western Kentucky University

Abstract

Since its implementation in 1986, the Independent Living Program has not been adequately researched. Despite the passage of the Foster Care Independence Act mandating that states maintain follow-up data, only a small number of states have published outcome studies. Many studies follow the path of former foster youths, but fail to link the information to the Independent Living Program. Others focus on whether the youths have completed high school. The need exists for longitudinal studies that directly link former foster youth's educational outcomes to their completion of the Independent Living Program. Such studies are necessary to measure the program's effectiveness and to illustrate areas of needed change. In an effort to begin the evaluation process in the state of Kentucky, this study endeavors to provide a foundational basis by facilitating a demographic profile of foster youths currently involved in the Independent Living Program in the Barren River Region.

## Introduction

Upon passage of the Foster Care Independence Act in 1999, states were required to maintain follow up data for more than three months prior to the exit of youths from the foster care system. Despite the mandate to focus on outcomes, only a small number of states published statewide outcome studies. Therefore the quality, consistency and effectiveness of individual state's independent living programs remains largely unknown, thereby impeding the development of effective interventions.

The Independent Living Program was first implemented in 1986, after the much publicized death of a former foster child who was “discharged to nowhere” on his eighteenth birthday and found dead on a street in New York City (Wetzstein, 1999). Yearly approximately 20,000 children reach their eighteenth birthday and effectively “age out” of the foster care system (Allred, 1999; Wetzstein, 1999).

Myriad research studies follow the path of former foster children, which often leads to homelessness, prison, public assistance utilization, teenage pregnancy, physical and sexual victimization and psychiatric hospitals (Barth & Jonson-Reid, 2000; Eilertson, 2002; Park, Metraux, Brodbar & Culhane, 2004; Poertner, McDonald & Murray, 2000). Other research studies focus on the fact that half of those who age out of the foster system do not finish high school by the time they leave foster care (Eilertson, 2002).

### *Literature Review*

An exception to the lack of available state outcomes is the longitudinal study of 141 young adults who exited foster care in the state of Wisconsin in 1995 and 1996. The youths in this study were interviewed on their transitional experience between twelve months and three years after leaving care. An interview method was employed that involved three separate rounds of interviews. The first was conducted before the young adult exited out-of-home care, the second twelve to eighteen months later, and the third

was completed approximately three years after the youth had exited care (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor & Nesmith, 2001). Participants were also asked a series of questions collectively referred to as the Mental Health Inventory that was developed by the RAND Corporation for a health insurance experiment that assessed respondent's level of psychological well being and distress. To date Courtney et al. (2001) has published the results from the first two rounds of interviews twelve to eighteen months after leaving care with the study embarking on a new area of research.

The results of this study's research indicated that most of the youth transitioning to independence did not have the support system necessary to meet self-sufficiency outcomes. Most lacked medical care, were victims of violence, experienced housing instability, lacked vocational skills, had limited access to mental health care, and only three-fifths were employed.

The outcomes illustrated the lack of concrete assistance for a variety of life skills prior to discharge. Courtney et al. (2001) concluded that these findings suggest that training in independent living skills does not necessarily include the involvement of foster youths in "real life" activities that will be requirements once they are on their own. The authors posited that concrete assistance must be provided in locating housing and employment. The disparity between the sample member's expectations regarding their continued education while they were in care, and the fact that 37% had not yet received a diploma or a GED, points to the need for social workers to focus on educational attainment. This study clearly illustrated the missing links in service provision to this group. Social workers must devise effective transitional safety nets ensuring that former foster youths have access to health and mental health care.

This longitudinal study has strengths that include racial diversity, a strong female

to male ratio, a random selection from 42 different demographic locations throughout the state, and the identification of key areas important for intervention. The methodology is sound but this study only begins to conduct the type of analysis necessary to answer important questions regarding what professionals can do to better aid foster youths transitioning into independence. It also fails to adequately answer who among foster youth does well in making the transition into self-sufficiency and who does not.

Park, Metraux, Brodbar & Culhane (2004) researched public shelter admission among young adults with child welfare out-of-home care histories. This study explored a new area of research in that it focused on rates of adult homelessness among persons leaving out-of-home care while concurrently examining a comparison group with the same outcomes for persons who exited the welfare system, but were not in out-of-home placements. Previous studies on this subject did not include comparison groups in their analyses.

Data for this research study was drawn from the Child Care Review Service maintained by the New York City Administration for Children's Services (ACS) and from data of the New York City Department of Homeless Services (DHS). Data from the ACS was from 1981 to 2001. DHS has tracked public shelter use since 1986 through its family shelter system and its single adult shelters. In order to be considered a match across both data systems both observations had to have a matching social security number and matching last name, date of birth or first name. In the absence of a Social Security number, date of birth, gender, first and last names must all match. The study group included 11,958 young adults. The dependent variable for this study was first time admission to a DHS shelter. The independent variables included demographic and child welfare related variables. The demographic variables included indicators of age,

gender, ethnicity and race. The child welfare related variables included the age at final exit from child welfare, length of stay in the system, history of out-of-home placement, year of ACS closure, and type of final exit from child welfare (Park et al., 2004).

Descriptive analyses were conducted to produce information on the background characteristics and the extent of public shelter use. Cox regression analysis, a proportional hazards model that uses partial likelihood estimation and examines the impact of selected variables on the risk of public shelter admission was employed as a data analysis technique.

Park et al. (2004) found that 19% of former child welfare clients entered public shelters within 10 years of exit from the child welfare system. Persons with out-of-home placement histories were twice as likely to enter public shelters (22%) as those who received non-placement preventative services (11%). Persons exiting child welfare by running away have the highest rate of shelter use (33.6%), followed by those discharged to independent living (25.6%). This study reiterated the need for concrete assistance for a variety of needed life skills and the development of effective transitional safety nets. Additionally, this study noted an opportunity for intervention for the women with child welfare histories who are bringing children into the homeless shelters. By extending services to adults who received its services as children and are parenting their own children, ACS social workers may be able to implement a preventative means of providing supportive and housing services (Park et al., 2004).

Limitations of the study included the absence of data regarding employment, education, health problems, and behavioral disorders. Further research is also needed to ascertain whether an association exists between the type of out-of-home care, such as institutional care and foster home, and the homeless rate (Park et al., 2004).

Gavazzi, Alford & McKenry (1996) explored the use of social interventions that fail to deal with issues related to ethnicity. The study describes a culturally specific rites of passage program in Ohio designed for Black youth in foster care as an adjunct to an independent living program. This study broke new ground by incorporating the concept of rites of passage with foster youth's successful transition into self-sufficiency. Previous studies note that such programs do not lend themselves easily to evaluation because the Black community is resistant to traditional quantitative approaches that have often been used against them.

Naturalistic research methods were employed in an effort to effectively discover the subjective meanings and multiple realities of the youth's experiences in the Rites of Passage Program. The sample for the pilot study consisted of 37 Black males. The level of experience in the program varied from one month to three years and all were in out-of-home placements. The interviews lasted from one and one-half to four hours and were taped and transcribed. The interviewer and respondent were matched by race and gender. Qualitative research methodology was used with content analysis to identify and organize themes as they emerged. Coding schemes were developed throughout the data collection.

Many of the themes that emerged from the narratives were consistent with the program goals such as, importance of learning, education and self-responsibility. This, in turn, generated some initial support for the utilization of culturally specific programs for Black males in urban areas. The findings of this study illustrated the need for culturally specific programs in facilitating the self-empowerment and self-sufficiency of minority foster care youth. Limitations of this study include the omission of females, why some participants were more affected by the program, how lasting the impact will be given how recently the program had been completed, and the absence of a comparison group.

## Method

### *Research Design*

The research design employed in this demographic profile was a systematic random sampling method, which is a form of probability sampling, utilized through the use of secondary data. The secondary data was obtained through the normal intake process of the Cabinet for Health and Family Services in the ten-county Barren River Region. The data was collected from the March 2005 Independent Living spreadsheet generated through the Cabinet for Health and Family Services' database. The systematic random sampling was conducted through the selection of every fifth person listed on the Barren River section of the Independent Living monthly report until the demographic variables for twenty individuals had been selected. Individual items on the spreadsheet were patterned only in regard to state region, thereby ensuring a random selection. The lack of any discernable ordering on the spreadsheet helped to ensure that the sample for the study had the same distribution of characteristics as the population from which it was drawn. Therefore, the sample used to create the demographic profile is representative of the youths currently involved in the Independent Living Program in the Barren River Region of Kentucky.

The researcher's goal was to establish a set of baseline information for the Barren River Region within this exploratory study. As such there was no research question, hypothesis or independent and dependent variable.

### *Instrumentation*

The researcher generated descriptive statistics, frequencies, frequency tables, graphs, and the use of inferential statistics through a bivariate measure of association



utilizing a correlation (Pearson's Correlation Coefficient) to measure the relationship between "age" and "months in out-of-home-care" (OOHC). The use of a measure of association through the use of Pearson's Correlation Coefficient, measures of variability or dispersion, including range and standard deviation, and measures of central tendency, including mode, mean and median, facilitated the description of the variables necessary for the demographic profile.

Five demographic variables were used to facilitate the demographic profile including "age", "gender", "race", "resource type" and "months in out-of-home care". The variable "resource type" was operationalized as foster youths residing in foster homes, psychiatric facilities, and private child care facilities. Nominal measures included "gender", "race" and "resource type". The demographic measure of "age" as a ratio measure and "months in OOHC" as an interval measure were also included in the set of five demographic variables. The inclusion of ratio and interval level variables made it possible to implement the use of the Pearson's Correlation Coefficient.

### Results

The demographic profile of youths participating (n=20) in the Independent Living Program in the Barren River Region was created to establish baseline information for the region. The age of participants ranged from a minimum age of 12 to a maximum age of 18 years old with a median age of 15, a standard deviation of 2.18 and a range of 6. The mean age was 15.5 and the greatest number of youths included in the study were 18 years of age (n=6), as represented by the mode. The mean of 15 years of age indicated that 50% of the youths in the program were over the age of 15 while 50% were below the age of fifteen.

Within the sample (n=20) the race of the youths was determined to be 85% White (n=17) with 12 males and 5 females. African Americans/Blacks (n=3) represented 15% of the sample with 1 male and 2 females. The gender of the youths was predominately male with 65% male (n=13) and 35% female (n=7). The resource type of youths participating in the Independent Living Program was 55% residing in private child care facilities (n=11), 35% in foster homes (n=7), and 10% in psychiatric facilities (n=2).

The number of months spent in out-of-home care ranged from 4 months to 185 months in care. The range was 181 and the standard deviation was 40.1. The mean was 32.1 months spent in out-of-home care while the median was 22.0. The correlation between the demographic variables “age” and “months in out-of-home-care” was not significant at .296 and indicated a weak positive correlation. The mean was most certainly distorted by the extreme value represented by one 185-month stay in OOHC and the small sample size (n=20). The extreme score also affected the standard deviation score of 40.1.

## Discussion

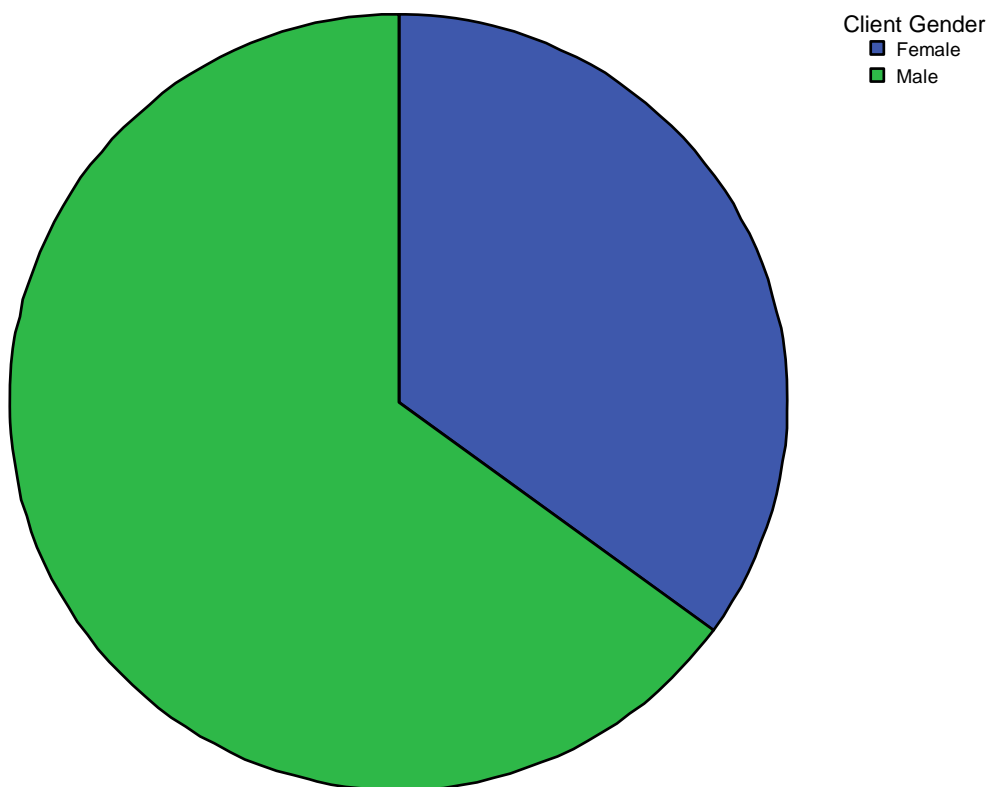
### *Findings*

The purpose of this study was to facilitate a demographic profile of youths currently enrolled in the Independent Living Program in the Barren River Region. This profile was completed in an effort to establish baseline information for informational purposes and future research. The data analysis identified the average youth participant in the program to be male, 65% (n=13) and White, 85% (n=17). The average age of participants was 15 years old. The youths resided most often in private child care facilities 55%, (n=11), followed by foster homes, 35% (n=7), with only 10%, (n=2) residing in psychiatric facilities. There was a great disparity between the length of time

youths spent in out-of-home placements, with a maximum of 185 months, a minimum of 4 months and a range of 181. The average number of months in out-of-home care was 32 months. The Pearson's Correlation Coefficient's measurement of the relationship between the demographic variables "age" and "months spent in out-of-home-care" indicated a weak positive correlation (as the age of the youths increased so did the length of time spent in OOHC) that was not statistically significant at .296.

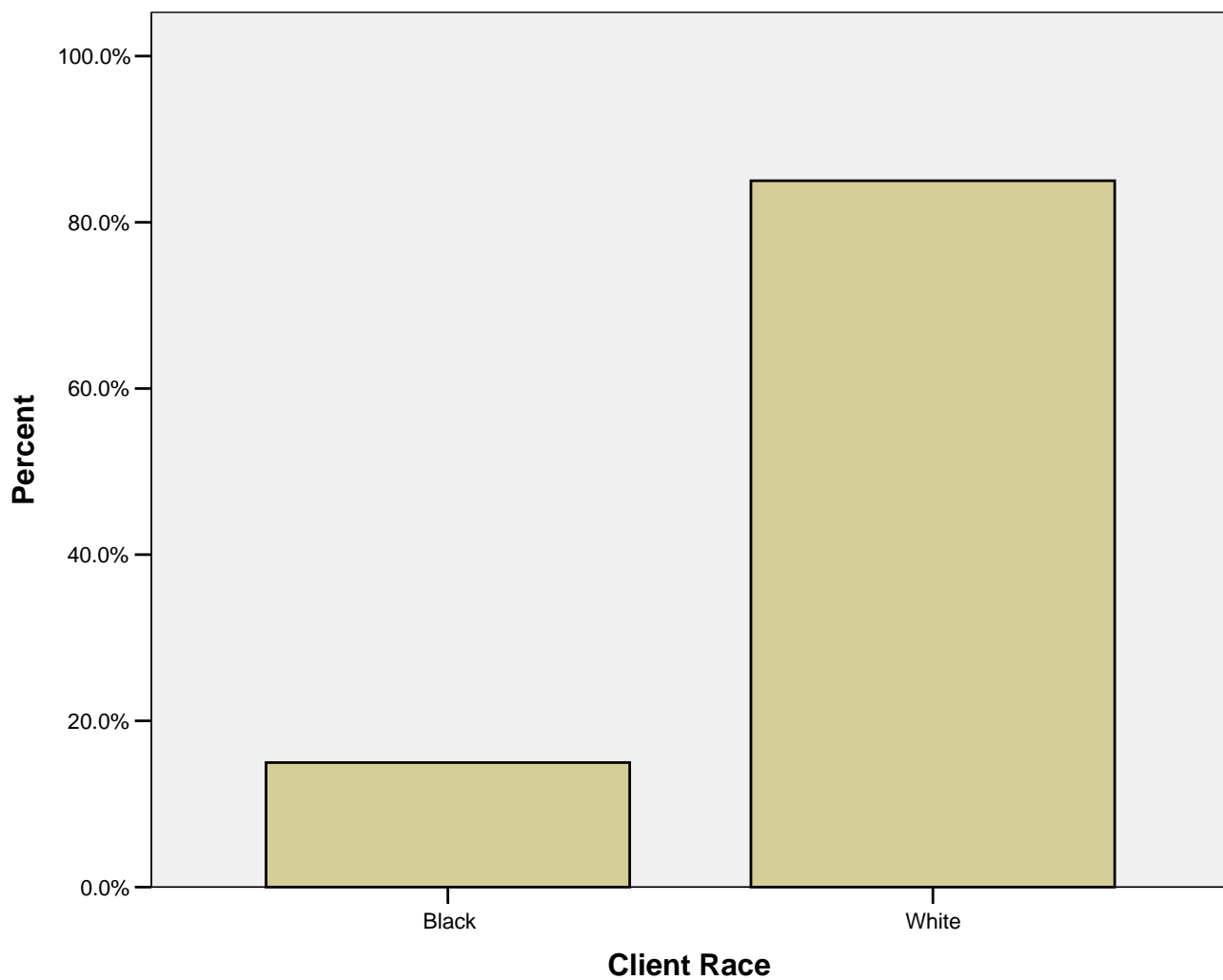
**Barren River Region Independent Living Program's Pie Chart: Gender**

(N=20)



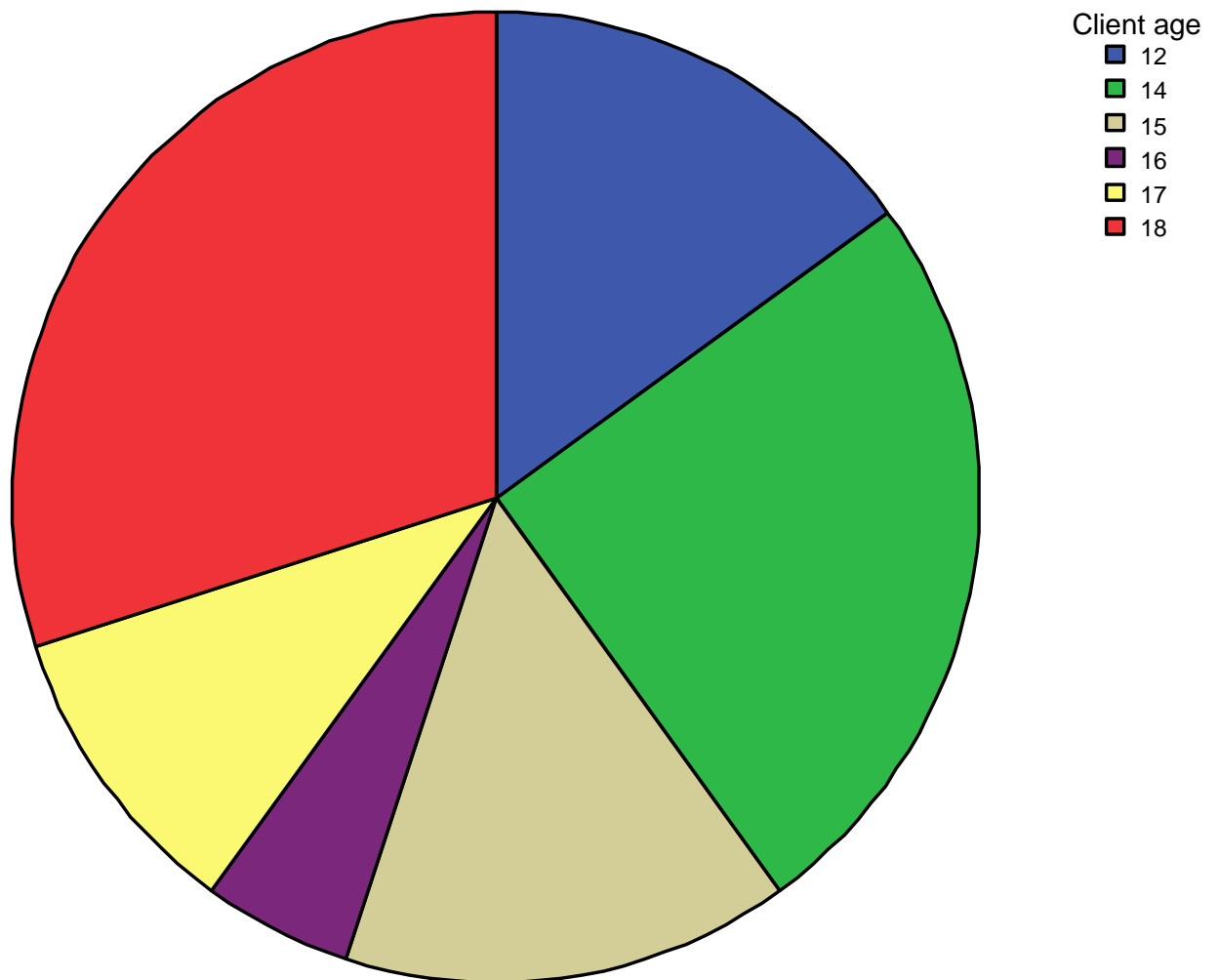
**Barren River Region Independent Living Program's Percentage Graph: Race**

(N=20)

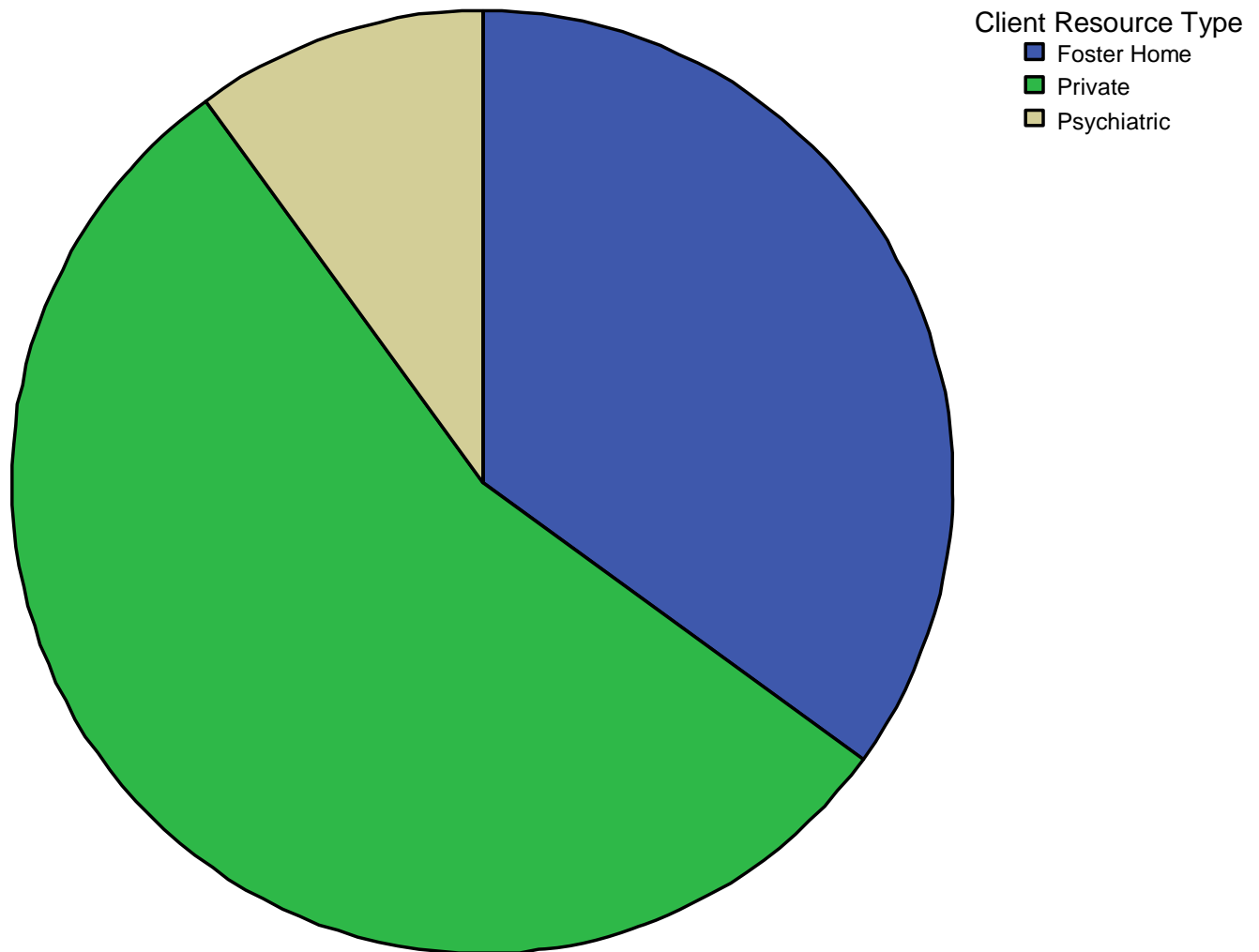


Barren River Region Independent Living Program's Pie Chart: Age

(N=20)



Barren River Region Independent Living Program's Pie Chart: Resource Types  
(N=20)



### *Limitations*

Limitations of secondary data sources can often be attributed to bias resulting from the data being collected for purposes other than research (Marlow, 2001). Gaps in

available information can also be present. In this study the use of secondary data held some limitations in terms of the availability of anticipated demographic variables. This researcher had originally intended to include several additional variables including; age at which the youth entered out-of-home-care, number of siblings in foster care, educational level of parents, urban/rural residency, why the youth had entered out-of-home-care and number of placements.

A possible limitation with the use of a systematic random sampling method with secondary data is if the ordering of the items from the list follows a particular pattern. In this research the lists were grouped according to region, but not in any other discernable pattern. The researcher posits that there was no limitation with the application of the systematic random sampling in the facilitation of the demographic profile.

A limitation within the demographic profile must be noted. The presence of an outlier in the variable “length of time in OOHC” greatly affects the scores for the mean (32.1) and standard deviation (40.1). This severely skewed distribution is further illustrated by the differences represented by the median (22.0) and mean (32.1) scores. The mean score (32.1) is greater than the median score (22.0), representing a positively skewed distribution. This large difference between the mean and median presents a problem in the study in that the distribution center for the variable “length of time in OOHC” cannot be unambiguously defined. To eliminate this problem the outlier should be removed and the statistics run again to eliminate the effect and thus eliminate the skewed distribution within variable “length of time in OOHC”.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

This study contributes to the establishment of baseline information for the Barren River Region and serves to establish the need for future research. As professionals,

social workers hold the ethical responsibility to conduct research to ensure that clients have access to needed services. It is equally important to ensure that existing services are, in fact, addressing an identified social problem in an effective manner. Future studies with the inclusion of additional demographic variables are warranted. There is also a need for longitudinal studies designed to measure the effectiveness of the current curriculum taught by the Independent Living Program in regards of participant's preparedness for independence once they leave out-of-home-care.

#### References

- Allred, V. (1999). Senate clears foster child assistance bill. *CQ Weekly*, 46, 284-285.  
Retrieved January 21, 2005, from Ebscohost database.



- Barth, R., & Jonson-Reid, M. (2000). Outcomes after child welfare services: Implications for the design of performance measures. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 22, 763-787.
- Collins, M. (2001). Transition to adulthood for vulnerable youth: A Review of Research and Implications for Policy. *Social Service Review*, 75, 271-292.
- Courtney, M., Pilavin, I., Grogan-Kaylor, A., & Nesmith, A. (2001). Foster youth transitions to adulthood: A longitudinal view of youth leaving care. *Child Welfare*, 80, 685-718.
- Eilerston, C. (2002). When foster care ends. *State Legislators*, 28, 24-26. Retrieved January 21, 2005, from Ebscohost database.
- Gavazzi, S., Alford, K., & McKenry, P. (1996). Culturally specific programs for foster care youth: The sample case of an African American rites of passage program. *Family Relations*, 45, 166-187.
- Marlow, C. (2001). *Research methods for generalist social work* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed). California: Brooks/Cole.
- Park, J., Metraux, S., Brodbar, G., & Culhane, D. (2004). Public shelter admission among young adults with child welfare histories by type of service and type of exit. *Social Service Review*, 68, 284-300.
- Poertner, J., McDonald, T., & Murray, C. (2000). Child welfare outcomes revisited. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 22, 789-810.
- Wetzstein, C. (1999). Orphans get the boot. *Insight on the News*, 44, 28-29. Retrieved January 21, 2005, from Ebscohost database.